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Alessandro Vescovi**The Uncanny and the Secular in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and *The Hungry Tide***

Abstract I: In *La grande cecità*, Amitav Ghosh affronta una serie di questioni relative all'inadeguatezza della comprensione da parte dell'opinione pubblica del pericolo insito nel cambiamento climatico. Le spiegazioni di Ghosh per questa incapacità non possono essere facilmente riassunte perché tracciano una genealogia assai complessa tra cambiamento climatico, imperialismo e capitalismo. Tutte queste forze affondano le radici nell'Illuminismo europeo, così come il genere del romanzo realista. Il saggio che segue riprende alcuni degli spunti di riflessione proposti da Ghosh per collegarli al suo romanzo ecologico *Il paese delle maree* (2004), dove questi stessi principi, presenti *in nuce*, appaiono tuttavia meno evidenti, nascosti come sono tra le pieghe del discorso poetico di Nirmal. Dopo la pubblicazione di *La grande cecità*, appare evidente che il discorso poetico di Nirmal debba essere interpretato come una forma di resistenza al pensiero scientifico dominante e ai limiti imposti dalla stessa scrittura romanzesca.

Abstract II: In *The Great Derangement, Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Amitav Ghosh addresses a series of key questions about the apparent incapacity of the public opinion to envisage the imminent danger of climate change. Ghosh's answer to the question can hardly be summarized, as it traces a complex parallel genealogy of climate change, imperialism, and capitalism – all of them being rooted in European Enlightenment, like the novel itself. My paper will briefly trace these hints and link them to Ghosh's most famous eco-novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where they are equally inapparent, dissolved as they are in aesthetic digressions. Such digressions, it becomes evident after *The Great Derangement*, should be read as an alternative way of interpreting nature, which calls for alternative ways of thinking and novel writing.

Let's be optimistic and imagine that a hundred years hence all our concerns about the environment will come to an end and humans will find a way to live pacifically along with other species on this Earth of ours. Then *The Great Derangement* will be in many ways outdated, since its prime concern was with climate change, however it will still be of interest for literary scholars, who will utilize it to shed light on the thought and poetics of Amitav Ghosh, by then a classic master. In this essay, I shall go through a few pages of *The Great Derangement* in order to consider some episodes in *The Hungry Tide* where the sublime and the uncanny may resonate with the essay on climate change.

The Great Derangement is an important book in many respects, since it brings together science and humanities, ecology and literature, culture in general and the poetics of the novel in a worldwide scenario. Indeed, most of the book pivots around a question, namely why is it so difficult for the novel as a genre to talk about climate change. Ghosh contends that we are not dealing effectively with climate change not only because significant economic interests are involved, as intellectuals like Arundhati Roy (1999) or Naomi Klein (2014) among the others have convincingly claimed at a local and at a global level; he certainly does not underestimate the power of vested interests, political hegemony, or capitalism as driving forces, but he also blames a problem of culture and imagination. Most people know that a climate change is taking place, and yet we find it difficult to imagine what climate change actually means and entails. If only professionals of imagination, such as novelists or screenwriters, could give shape to it, it would be easier to take some effective course of action.

Curiously, the essay does not begin with scientific data or political or even philosophical analyses, but with an arresting image from *Star Wars*. Ghosh recalls a scene when the Millennium Falcon seeks refuge in what Han Solo and princess Leia believe to be an asteroid. Suddenly the 'asteroid' begins to burp, so they realize that in fact they are not in a cave, but in the gullet of a huge space monster; not unpredictably the twain makes a narrow escape. Ghosh remarks that this uncanny effect could only be created by Californian screenwriters of the 1980s, since

The humans of the future will surely understand, knowing what they presumably will know about the history of their forebears on Earth, that only in one, very brief era, lasting less than three centuries, did a significant number of their kind believe that planets and asteroids are inert (Ghosh 2016: 3).

The 'derangement' alluded to in the title consists in walking towards the climatic disaster without doing anything to stop or even slow down; so unprecedented is the scale of what is happening that we cannot even imagine it. Thus, part of the essay is devoted to imagination, connecting the poetics of the XX century novel with rationalistic philosophy and scientific modes of knowledge. One of the problems with realism as a mode of writing, Ghosh contends, is its dependence not so much on reality but on probability (Ghosh 2016: 16-17). Indeed 'improbable' has become a derogatory term for a fictional work and reviewers often look askance at coincidences in serious novels or films. Indeed, the modern novel has excised coincidences as bad writing; yet most people have gone through experiences that would actually be improbable if they were told in realistic fiction, and Ghosh lists some from his own life. Thus, like much scientific knowledge, the novel is based on probability; this is hardly surprising since, as Ghosh contends, the novel was born from the same protestant mentality and positivistic attitude that invented the scientific method, carbon economy, and began the large-scale overexploitation of natural resources. Therefore, it is very difficult to remain within the boundaries of the realistic novel and distance oneself from its premises. The realistic novel simply finds it too difficult to represent something so unprecedented – and therefore unlikely in the mind of the readers – as climate change. Other forms of fiction could do that, most noticeably sci-fi, but, like sensation novels, it is considered the

“outhouse of fiction”, as Moretti maintains (2001: 200), not serious enough to provide more than entertainment.

By ‘serious’ Moretti does not mean the opposite of funny or comic, but rather that kind of fiction or non-fiction that has been produced mostly by and for the middle-class that not only amuses, but has some bearing on the readers’ lives, providing information as well as cultural, political, ethical, spiritual, philosophical insights. Moretti’s observations on the ‘serious novel’ can easily be extended also to serious non-fiction. The essay as a genre, after all, struck its roots in the same soil as the novel did. A serious essay – i.e. an essay that wants to be taken seriously and affect the readers’ lives somehow – is subjected to restrictions akin to those of the novel.

As a humanist and an intellectual, Ghosh tackles the Anthropocene by exposing the philosophy that has made it possible and by pointing out the unsustainability of over-developed, mostly western, lifestyles. However, it is difficult to utilize the western philosophical discourse to counter its tenets, one of these stating that the Earth is there for humans to exploit its riches. This is probably one of the reasons why some deep ecologists have resorted to eastern philosophies and religions to advocate an alternative world-view (Guha 1989). But deep ecology is not a path Ghosh wants to tread; he stages a striking critique of it in *The Hungry Tide* (Jaising 2015). Therefore, he mostly remains within the realms of the secular scientific essay, where everything that is stated is supposed to be true and falsifiable. Ghosh has always been an enemy to boundaries, even those that divide fiction from non-fiction, so that he incorporates fictional techniques in his non-fiction and histories in his fiction (Aldama 2002: 86). Indeed, *The Great Derangement* stretches the limits of non-fiction almost to a breaking point, but even then, I feel, its author cannot quite turn the western episteme on its head. Apparently, the notion that the realistic novel cannot provide an alternative discourse to the dominant western epistemology is true also of the essayistic form. Reading the *Great Derangement*, one gets the impression that Ghosh struggles to find a language and a way to talk about non-humans and non-human agency which can be taken seriously. But, as he himself points out, the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, which goes back to Descartes, makes it almost impossible to talk of non-human agency today. Still a recognition of the non-human standpoint is pivotal in environment protection. This is where Ghosh’s discourse drifts towards different languages, like the uncanny in *Star Wars*, the legend of Bon Bibi, familiar to the readers of *The Hungry Tide*, Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’*. The supernatural, myths and religion cannot easily fit in the discourse of the scientific essay, so *The Great Derangement* gives rise to some uneasy cognitive and rhetorical compromises. A case in point is Ghosh’s intimation that non-human nature possesses something akin to a will of its own; he quotes Timothy Morton’s and George Marshall’s ideas of wild weather as uncanny:

Writing of the freakish events and objects of our era, Timothy Morton asks, “Isn’t it the case, that the effect delivered to us in the [unaccustomed] rain, the weird cyclone, the oil slick is something uncanny?” George Marshall writes, “Climate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty” (Ghosh 2016: 30).

The words quoted from Morton and Marshall are by no means new, strong, or unusual, Ghosh could have easily paraphrased them, but quotations put some distance between his own words and their claims. By citing two authorities he declines the responsibility of 'seriously' stating that weather has a kind of agency, if not a will. As an anthropologist, he goes then one step farther in pointing out how the humankind had once known that there is a non-human agency:

These changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, *the presence or proximity of non-human interlocutors* (Ghosh 2016: 30, my italic).

Can the timing of this renewed recognition be mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity an indication that *there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought?* And if that were so, could it not also be said that *the earth has itself intervened to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being?* (Ghosh 2016: 31, my italic).

These words are not a citation, but it is not clear whether they are a summary of Morton's thought or rather the original statement by Ghosh. The rhetorical strategy of affirming something in the form of questions protects the author of the essay as he is tentatively foraying outside the realm of seriousness. Indeed, he hastens to go back to the serious writing as he contends that his main point does not need the notion of non-human agency to be driven home:

This possibility [of the earth communicating with us] is not, by any means, the most important of the many ways in which climate change challenges and refutes Enlightenment ideas. It is, however, certainly, the *most uncanny*. For what it suggests – a indeed proves – is that *nonhuman forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought* (Ghosh 2016: 31, my italic).

Subtly Ghosh affirms and negates that the earth and the forests (not only animals) may have an agency of their own and that they have a bearing on the human way of thinking. Eventually he appears to endorse this idea, but he surprisingly dismisses it as unimportant. This is paradoxical: he is saying that non-human forces intervene in human thought, contrary to what everyone in the western tradition has thought for some 2500 years, but he claims it is not important! In fact he has no other choice: to affirm it would mean to go counter to the limitations set by the paradigms of western discourse. Ghosh cannot afford basing his critique on the will of non-human entities, but he somehow needs the notion. The paradigms of western episteme appear inadequate to tackle the Anthropocene, but just to turn one's back to western discourse would mean to give up the possibility to be taken seriously by a wide portion of his audience. Quoting someone else's ideas (the essayistic version of heteroglossia) is the closest the essayist can get to using an alternative discourse and being taken seriously.

Again, at the end of his text, Ghosh extensively quotes from the encyclical *Laudato*

si' by Pope Francis. Again, one has the impression that the essayist cannot, but wished to, resort to the kind of powerful and evocative language to which the Pope is entitled. Significantly, Ghosh praises the Encyclical because it "challenges contemporary practices not only in the choice of words, but also in the directness of its style" (Ghosh 2016: 155) and he quotes several passages like the following: "Francis of Assisi helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology and take us to the heart of what it is to be human" (Ghosh 2016: 155). Later he quotes again "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in the debate of the environment, so as to hear both *the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (Ghosh 2016: 157, the italic is in Ghosh's text, not in the Encyclical).

While some of Bergoglio's words could have been written also by Ghosh, the latter could hardly use the metaphor about the cry of the poor without sounding melodramatic and therefore suspicious if not unreliable, while the Pope can write in this way and be taken seriously. This happens because Ghosh must write within the western epistemological tradition, which is conventionally secular, callous, unheeding of emotions, and wary of metaphors, whereas the Pope writes within the religious homiletic tradition, in which metaphors and empathy are a necessary and accepted part. When talking about environment protection the Pope has one advantage over Ghosh, namely that he does not need to suffer the restraints of the secular discourse, while the serious essay and the rationalistic tradition within which Ghosh writes are eminently secular and human-centred. Secularism is a kind of tacit agreement among scholars that has made communication and discussions possible between people with different convictions and backgrounds, indeed it is one of the major tenets of cosmopolitanism. If Ghosh had not been restrained by the convention of secularism, he might have used a clearer and more vibrant language, with more statements and fewer inverted comas.

However Ghosh did bring together the poor and the earth in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), linking them in a very vivid way. The novelistic medium allowed him to do away with inverted commas and footnotes, relying instead on the Bakhtinian inclusion of multiple discourses and network narratives with multifocal narrations (Mukherjee 2010). Oftentimes Ghosh left the narrative agency to the Bon Bibi legend and to Rilke, and to a lesser extent to the dolphins. True, all of them are either quoted or translated, but their voices merge with those of the western-educated focalizers: Piya, Kanai and Nirmal. All these three are sooner or later bound to experience some uncanny or sublime feelings in their encounter with the jungle of the Sundarbans.

Although scholars have favoured realistic and postcolonial readings of the novel, 'uncanny' is a keyword in *The Hungry Tide* as much in *The Great Derangement*, where it serves as a bridge between the rationalistic discourse of the essay and the non-rationalistic appraisal of non-human. Indeed, ever since Jentsch's and Freud's first theorization of the uncanny, the concept has been related to a sort of hesitation – very much like Todorov's hesitation about the fantastic – which Ghosh seems to read as a glimpse into a non-descript complexity that defies the power of rationalism¹. While rationalism is usually dismissive of the uncanny,

¹ In fact, we shall not follow Jentsch's and Freud's anatomies because the only kind of uncanny in which we are interested here is the "natural uncanny", viz. the uncanny generated in contact with wildlife phenomena.

Ghosh claims that we should take it much more seriously, as it denounces the inadequacy of rational paradigms. The Cartesian duality of *res cogitans* vs *res extensa*, much decried by Ghosh, doubles the dichotomy human vs natural, which is just another way of phrasing the opposition between myself and the other, us and them. Ghosh's natural uncanny is very much like the sublime, in that both entail the recognition that this duality is delusory. Humans are in fact part of nature and in no way essentially different. The difference between sublimity and natural uncanniness is simply a matter of viewpoint: when the subject contemplates the oneness with nature without fear, one speaks of sublime, whereas when one fears some damage or when nature claims human lives, one speaks of uncanny.

There are a few sequences of uncanny and fantastic in *The Hungry Tide*, which involve the three focalizers of the story: Piya, the American biologist, Kanai, the metropolitan entrepreneur, and his uncle Nirmal, the old Bengali Marxist and former headmaster of the local school. As Pramod Nayar (2010) points out, all three are culturally outsiders in the Sundarbans, they all think and interpret the world according to the western rational discourse, unlike the main local characters, Fokir, Kusum and Horen. The latter are therefore bearers of a non-rationalized knowledge of the place, which for them is 'canny' as much as the everchanging and dangerous nature of the Sundarbans is uncanny for the metropolitans. The locals may well suffer the heat, thirst, hunger and fear in jungle, but they are not out of place; in this respect they remain much closer to Rilke's animals, who "already know by instinct / we're not comfortably at home / in our translated world", as Nirmal writes in his journal (Ghosh 2004: 206). In this context 'translated' means rationalized, estranged from the natural language. Indeed, we could substitute 'translated' with 'secular' and the statement would still make sense. It is their non-secular perception of the jungle that makes Horen and Fokir feel at home, while Nirmal and Kanai are uneasy. Talking of the story of Luis Bernier, Nirmal tells Horen that the explorer had been caught by a sudden storm. Certainly an uncanny event in the travel of the European, whose viewpoint is shared by Nirmal. Horen however has a different explanation:

That's what happened, then. They crossed the line by mistake and ended up on one of Dokkhin Rai's islands. Whenever you have a storm like that – one that appears so suddenly out of nowhere – you know it's the doing of Dokkhin Rai and his demons". I grew impatient and said, "Horen! A storm is an atmospheric disturbance. It has neither intention nor motive".

I had spoken so sharply that he would not disagree with me, although he could not bring himself to agree either. "As to that, Saar", he said, "let us leave each other to our beliefs and see what the future holds".

Here was a man, I thought, whom the Poet would have recognized: "filled with muscle and simplicity (Ghosh 2004: 147).

Throughout the novel "the Poet", Rilke, is for Nirmal and Ghosh a way of evading the tyranny of their respective 'serious' genres. The fact that Nirmal comments upon the event

The two forms of uncanny share a certain uneasiness at the sudden recognition that something is not quite as it seemed or not quite as one had imagined it. Both in the case of Freud and Ghosh one recognises an epistemic disproportion between our received knowledge and the evidence of our senses.

through Rilke signals that it has moved something akin to the uncanny or the sublime in his consciousness. À propos de Rilke, in an interview Ghosh once declared:

And yet, especially if you have children, you cannot see the world that way [nihilistic]. After 9/11 Rilke was an enormous inspiration for me – that's what Rilke is about, about loving the world, about seeing it and loving it for what it is (Vescovi 2009: 136).

In a famous episode Kanai experiences the natural uncanny in the jungle when, after an altercation, he bids Fokir to go away and remains alone on Garjontola's shore. This very long sequence cannot be quoted in full, however it is worth mentioning that the quarrel between the two men begins when Fokir challenges Kanai's secular world-view. On approaching the island, Fokir asks Kanai if he is afraid, like himself, and explains that he is afraid because a tiger must be nearby. What Fokir implies is not that he knows about the tiger and therefore he is afraid, but the other way round: he is seized by fear and feels his own goose bumps, therefore, he concludes, a tiger must be nearby². And surely Fokir has goose bumps, Kanai notices. Yet secular Kanai is not ready to follow this argument, and clings to his rationality which considers fear the consequence of a conscious act of perception³. Soon after this as he clumsily walks in the shallow water, the very land seems to attack him:

Then suddenly it was as though the earth had come alive and was reaching for his ankle. Looking down, he discovered that a rope-like tendril had wrapped itself around his ankles. He felt his balance going and when he tried to slide a foot forward to correct it, his legs seemed to move in the wrong direction (Ghosh 2004: 325).

Later Kanai remains alone on the island and he panics as believes that a crocodile is heading for him. He starts thinking disorderly of the hunting techniques of tigers and crocodiles, until he feels another danger as he spots, or believes to spot, a tiger. At that moment his rationality fails and leaves place to his natural pre-linguistic self:

He could not recall the word, not even the euphemisms Fokir had used: it was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and his senses had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation. The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the source of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood. It was an artefact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely (Ghosh 2004: 329).

² The connection between fear, religion and ethics is only partly revealed in the novel. In brief, the fear of the tiger demon Dokkhin Rai is proof that men enter his domain only pushed by necessity and not greed, which is considered the principle of all sins and evils. Indeed although Dokkhin Rai is a fierce god, he shows mercy to the humans who enter his territory compelled by necessity and recognize his authority through fear among other things (Vescovi 2014).

³ Incidentally it is interesting to note that the origin of fear and its connection with the material world (*Adhyasa*) is a classic *topos* of Hindu philosophy that goes back to the 8th century theologian Adi Shankara.

The vision is very much like a *darshan*, the earthly appearance of a divinity. As the deity of the island, the tiger, appears majestic and benign: “It was sitting on its haunches with its head up, watching him with its tawny, flickering eyes. The upper parts of its coat were of a colour that shone like gold” (Ghosh 2004: 329). The noun ‘tiger’ is never mentioned throughout the episode, because giving it a name would mean to ‘translate’ it, to secularize it⁴. On the contrary, in front of the tiger-deity, Kanai, awed, loses his ability to master language and logic. It is worth pointing out that the English language, rationalism, and secularism were all brought to India by the colonizers, and are reduced to nil by a divinity that is as much Hindu as Muslim (Jalais 2008). Paradoxically for a novelist, Ghosh seems to mistrust language – a “bag of tricks”, in Piya’s words (Ghosh 2004: 159) and mere “ripples and waves” on the surface in Moyna’s (260) – which rationalizes and pretends to be able to express what is in fact unspeakable (White 2013: 521).

In a way, the meeting in the centre of the jungle might remind of *Heart of Darkness*, with one crucial difference, namely that Kanai does not find “the horror”, but a salvific sublime. This encounter with the tiger, or Dokkhin Rai as it is called as a deity, will positively change Kanai’s life.

Commenting on this episode, Pablo Mukherjee (2010) contends that Ghosh inserted it because it is consistent with the *jatra* (Bengali folk theatre) form on which Ghosh moulded his novel. The idea is certainly suggestive, but I believe that Ghosh’s natural uncanny has a wider scope than the mere form of the novel. The narrative does not offer a rational explanation of what passed on the island and readers are left with the freedom to choose between some unusual but scientifically explainable event, Horen and Fokir’s religious interpretation, or Rilke’s. The text is obviously open to interpretation, but so far scholars have taken a secular implied author for granted thus favouring the first hypothesis; I am not ready to say that this is not the case, but, after reading *The Great Derangement*, an interpretation that considers the possibility that “nonhuman forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought” must be taken into serious consideration. Also the words uttered by Ghosh on the difficulty of doing justice to his experience in the Sundarbans take on a distinctive meaning:

It was incredibly fulfilling, just living in those houses, to be on the boat at night: it was pure magic, pure magic. I just can’t explain how magical it was. If I was to write ten books like *The Hungry Tide*, it would never do justice to the absolute magic of being there at night with the tide changing, under the moon, and to hear the tiger nearby (Vescovi 2009: 140).

If we do not take ‘realistic’ to mean ‘probable’ and ‘explicable’ according to the western science, we must allow for an alternative realism that does not depend on western pos-

⁴ For the people of the Sundarbans the word *bāgh*, tiger, is taboo. This may be explained with the fear lest pronouncing the name might ‘call’ the animal (Ghosh 2004: 108). This is indeed coherent with the Vedic notion that *Vāc*, the Word, to which is dedicated one of the earliest hymns of the *Rigveda*, may summon the gods to the sacrificial altar. However, the silence about the tiger-deity in the novel may be an act of resistance against the blasphemous secularization of the feline, that is appropriated by white hunters first, then tour operators and western charities.

itivism, the same Horen reclaims in his discussion with Nirmal about the tempest. To deny or ignore this interpretation is to disavow the cultural richness of the people of the Sundarbans, to read only as tourists, albeit sophisticated⁵. *The Hungry Tide* is a novel where the land is the true protagonist, and where it purposefully influences human will.

I differ also from Nayar (2010) in that I do not agree that all the episodes he sets down as uncanny are significant as such. In fact, we should distinguish what may be uncanny for the reader and what is uncanny only for the characters. I am not interested in the instances of disorientation of the metropolitan characters, but only in the events for which the author does not provide a rational explanation. Losing her sense of direction as Piya falls in the muddy water is uncanny only for her; the reader finds it quite 'canny' (Nayar 2010). On the other hand, Piya experiences another uncanny situation when she is saved from a crocodile by Fokir, who had mysteriously sensed its presence. A different kind of uncanny occurs later as Fokir takes Piya to a pool where she finds exactly the dolphins she was looking for. It becomes apparent that although she and Fokir do not share a language – and they actually do little to communicate with each other – still they understand each other perfectly, she thinks, so much so that each can attend to his/her work at the same time without disturbing the other. The energy that they share is hardly explicable within a realistic context. I would rather call this second instance of inexplicable events "sublime", because Piya feels rather elated and not uneasy. Also Nirmal witnesses a kind of sublime *darshan* when he is taken by Kusum and Horen to Garjontola, where they meet a school of dolphins, which Kusum calls Bon Bibi's messengers. Initially he scorns Kusum, but he concedes that she has a point when he beholds the intelligent animals, and again translates this experience with Rilke's words.

"What is it?" I said. "Is it some kind of shushuk?"

It was Kusum's turn to smile. "I have my own name for them", she said. "I call them Bon Bibi's messengers". The triumph was hers now; I could not deny it to her.

All the time our boat was at that spot, the creatures kept breaking the water around us. What held them there? What made them linger? I could not imagine. Then there came a moment when one of them broke the surface with its head and looked right at me. [...] Where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead the gaze of the Poet. It was as if he were saying to me: some mute animal

*raising its calm eyes and seeing through us,
and through us. This is destiny [...] (Ghosh 2004: 235).*

Beside this romantic sublime, Nirmal and Kanai are granted another experience, which is both natural and political; Giles (2014) aptly calls it postcolonial sublime. Kanai describes it as he tries to explain to Piya what 'historical materialism' meant to his uncle: "For him it meant that everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (Ghosh 2004: 283). In order to explain this insight of his, Kanai recounts the story of the rise and fall of Port Canning as he had heard it from his uncle; it

⁵ My reference here is both to the Sahara Pariwani project of building a touristic resort in the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2004, Jaising 2015), but also to the power relations of the globalization (Bauman 1998).

is a story that involves hubris, greed, capital, science, geology, meteorology and anthropology. The sublime part of it is in the complexity of the relations, and the incommensurability between humans and the environment. Nirmal awes and stops at that, but his nephew will go a step farther.

Initially Kanai responds to the sublime in a typically colonial way, *viz* trying to control it (Giles 2014: 9), but then, like Nirmal, he is overwhelmed. The combined effect of his discussions with Piya, the reading of his uncle's journal, and his own adventure on Garjontola island brings Kanai to the perception of the sublimity of complexity, where, as in the case of Nirmal, everything is connected with everything else, including the attitude of metropolitan cosmopolite middle class men like himself (and most readers), the fate of tigers, and the fate of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The interconnection includes science and religion, words and silence, the secular and the non-secular, humans and non-humans, the uncanny and the sublime.

In short, although Ghosh's prose is not religious in any traditional sense of the word⁶, he appears to have some problems with secularism, as it is the product of a scientific discourse that he has often tried to oppose (Luo 2012). A few fissures in the neat prose of in his recent *The Great Derangement* tell that our relationship with the Earth cannot be completely and truly described within the traditional western scientific paradigm. His frequent reference to uncanny episodes, which is initially introduced as an issue connected with the poetics of the novel, in fact testifies to a genuine though yet undeveloped attempt at moving beyond the scientific discourse and beyond the human vs non-human dichotomy. *The Hungry Tide* abounds with uncanny incidents, some of which find no rational explanation and are rather resolved into the realm of religion or poetry. Far from being literary embellishments, these elements must be interpreted as a way of moving the boundaries of the secular novel into the realm of the non-secular, in other words, from the modes of knowledge of colonizers to the modes of knowledge that are deeply embedded in the Indian culture that the novel describes, where everything is interconnected.

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⁶ In *In an Antique Land*, where he is daily confronted with the piety of the fellahin, he is often asked whether he is religious and he mostly tries to dodge the question; at a pinch he answers: "'I was born a Hindu,' I said reluctantly, for if I had a religious identity at all it was largely by default" (Ghosh 1992: 47).

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